

Commissioner's Weekly Wrap Up

DCS Communications Office

March 24, 2005

The Week Ahead

Mon., March 28 – The Commissioner attends a “Building Families” adoption celebration for the South Central region in Columbia, Tenn. She also attends a proclamation signing for April’s Child Abuse Prevention Month at the state Capitol in Nashville.

Wed., March 30 – The Commissioner delivers the keynote address at a Tennessee Voices for Children event in Knoxville. She also attends an adoption celebration for the Knox County region.

Children First License Plates



April’s Child Abuse Prevention Month is just a few days away. While child abuse prevention should be at the forefront of everyone’s mind throughout the year, April is a special time to reiterate the mission and message of putting “children first.”

Did you know that Tennessee residents registering a private passenger motor vehicle who get the “Children First” specialty license plate are helping the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services? \$31.00 of the additional \$35.00 fee is allocated to DCS to provide additional funding for child abuse prevention. For fiscal year 2004, the department received \$88,300 from these funds. For more information, visit the Department of Safety’s Web site at www.tennessee.gov/safety.

Bulletin Board

You are cordially invited to neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) baby celebration on Fri., April 8, from 3-5 p.m. at the March of Dimes, located at 1101 Kermit Drive in Nashville. To RSVP, e-mail phann@marchofdimes.com or call (615) 399-3200. This event is open to the public.

At the celebration, you can meet other families of NICU babies – infants who were born before 37 weeks gestation. You can also find out more about the March of Dimes, take photos, win door prizes and just have fun with other families and children.

DCS Speak-Outs

Submitted William Haynes, Executive Director, Human Resources Development

The DCS Speak-Outs have been scheduled. Recently, 600 DCS employees were notified that they had been selected randomly to attend the Speak-Outs, which is an opportunity for employees to share concerns and suggestions on improving morale, the agency's work with children and families, and related issues.

The schedule follows:

- Monday, March 28, 2-4 p.m.
Union University, Jackson, Tenn.
Harvey Hall, Barefoot Student Union Building
- Monday, April 4, 10 a.m.-noon
University of Memphis, Memphis, Tenn.
University Center, Room 310
- Wednesday, April 6, 10 a.m.-noon
Southern Adventist University (Host), Chattanooga, Tenn.
Senior Neighbors of Chattanooga (Speak-Out location)
1000 Newby Street
- Wednesday, April 6, 2-4 p.m.
Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tenn.
Foundation Mansion
- Friday, April 8, 10 a.m.-noon
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tenn.
Tennessee Auditorium, University Center
- Monday, April 11, 9-11 a.m.

Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tenn.
Clement Auditorium

Participation in the Speak-Outs is strictly voluntary. However, we hope you will take this opportunity to share your thoughts and ideas with us as we work to make DCS a world-class child welfare agency. Your compliments, criticisms, concerns and suggestions are important to us. We are interested in finding out what you like and what you don't like.

Our host universities have been very gracious to provide us with facilities and facilitators for these speak outs. Please make every effort to attend the session most convenient for you. Directions to each location will follow.

If you did not receive an invitation, you may still attend, provided space is available. Please e-mail William Haynes at William.Haynes@state.tn.us.

Words from the Commissioner

Submitted by Commissioner Viola P. Miller

Excellence Is a Habit

Implementing a new practice model is challenging. However, we know that there is wonderful casework, which exemplifies excellence in using the four overarching themes of "family focused, strengths based and culturally responsive." When you see excellence demonstrated, tell Weekly Wrap Up the story. Judy Cole, Brennan Francois and Andrea Turner will review your nominations and select stories to be told periodically in the Weekly Wrap Up. Individuals selected will receive an "Excellence is a Habit" T-shirt and a certificate. It is time for us to begin moving beyond only hearing DCS "bad news". We make an important difference in the lives of families, children and youth everyday, and we need to recognize and celebrate that good work.

Clarifying a Few Things -Random Thoughts

Recently I have been hearing some things that perhaps need clarification. For example, I heard that DCS always places children first in DCS foster homes. I have looked high and low and cannot discover where this came from. We have very specific guidelines for placement decision-making, based on the best interest of the child, not who manages the foster home. We want to keep children in their own communities, with relatives if possible, with siblings if possible. We want all our children to receive the health and educational services they need when they need them. We want to minimize the trauma of moves and make the very best placement decisions for each child from the beginning of our involvement. Nowhere does this list prioritize DCS foster homes over others. When we do our 2:1 calculations, we count all foster homes, not just ours. We are working closely with our private providers to "share the load" of ensuring that we have access to the variety of homes and families that we need to meet the needs of our children.

Here's another one. There seems to be a sense that when we bid our in-home services we will be looking for a single statewide contractor. Not true. We will be working with the regions to determine who among the providers who bid for these services will most likely provide the quality of services that will result in the very best outcomes for our families and children. We will be looking for evidence-based practice and a willingness to measure results, just as we are measuring the outcomes within DCS.

Next, there appears to be a small number of individuals who view the retraining initiative currently underway as somehow reflecting negatively on the work done in the past. Nothing could be further from the truth. Before I ever arrived, DCS had embraced a new practice model. This model reflects a major shift, happening around the country, from a child-focused, deficit based, incident-specific approach to public child welfare. This shift began with the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and was further reinforced with the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process and reflected by the Program Improvement Plans (PIP) developed by all the states. It would have been totally unfair to current staff to completely change the practice model without providing the training necessary to make the changes inherent in the new model.

I am personally very proud of our new certification training. Sure, some of it may be redundant for some current employees, but all of us can benefit by reviewing and renewing our commitment to engaging families in our work. I do understand that the training staff are considering compressing the time and/or sequence of the training in consideration of the ongoing work of current employees. I'm certain that you will be hearing more about that from the training staff. If you have suggestions, Donna Johnson would love to hear them.

Please know how very proud I am of the work that you are doing everyday. There is no more difficult work and our successes are few ... few but, oh, so sweet. There is nothing as rewarding as a finalized adoption or seeing children kept safely in their homes or helping a young person leaving a youth development center to enter college.

Many of you have written to me in the past about different issues. Please feel free to e-mail me if you have concerns or just want to make certain that your voice is heard. Also, let me know if there are particular issues that you would like for me to write about in the Weekly Wrap Up.

Thanks, and be careful out there.

Office of Child Permanency Update

Submitted by Elizabeth Black, Executive Director, Child Permanency

We are in the process of making some exciting changes in the Office of Child Permanency. We expect that these changes will improve our ability to be responsive to kids and their families, private providers, resource parents and the community around the

issues of foster care, adoption, reunification, placement and permanency planning through all 12 DCS regions and the private provider community.

We will be focused on three major initiatives during the next two months.

We are seeking a director of permanency planning and a director of foster care and adoptions. Susan Price is serving as the acting director for permanency planning, and Lane Simpson is serving as the acting director for foster care and adoptions.

We are going to develop a dynamic, productive organizational structure that will build staff capacity to flourish and succeed in accomplishing the critical reform efforts. Michele Munson has begun serving as our lead consultant for permanency, and she will be the lead on this effort. We are going to establish three Team Excellence teams to support regional implementation plans in the areas of adoption, Child and Family Team Meetings, and diligent recruitment plans.

Seeking New Directors

We are looking for people with management experience who are talented and creative, who are visionary leaders and absolutely committed to improving outcomes for kids in this state. We need people who can implement the principles and standards of the TDCS Standards of Professional Practice for Serving Children and Families (Practice Model) and help bring the department into compliance with the Brian A. settlement agreement.

With Frank Mix taking on a new role as the regional administrator for the Mid-Cumberland region, we need to identify a new leader with the expertise and commitment to drive the next steps needed to implement the Child and Family Team meeting process throughout Tennessee in a quality manner. Someone who has an LCSW or MSW, along with both clinical expertise and a public child welfare background, would be ideal. It is an executive service level director I position. The salary has some flexibility based on years of experience and education.

With Mattie Satterfield taking on a new role in as the director of reunification, focused heavily on legislation, training, regional implementation planning and building an infrastructure to support the provision of intensive evidenced-based in-home services, we need to identify a new director of foster care and adoptions. We need someone who is able to promote resource parents who support birth families and encourage reunification, are committed to stability for children while in state custody, and willing and able to offer permanent homes for children who are not able to return to their own families. It is an executive service level director 3 position. The salary also has some flexibility based on years of experience and education.

Servella Terry, director of resource home recruitment, support and retention, is working diligently along with Gail Seymour and Scott Lee to support each of the 12 regions to ensure that there is one resource parent for every two children in state custody. They are working with all regions to ensure that these resource parents are able to meet the unique

needs of the children and youth we have in state custody. Colette Crawley-Martin is the family-to-family coordinator.

Suzanne White, director of child placement and private providers, is working along with Brian Hill, Susanne Crass, Kathryn Bradford, Terry Bracey and Amy Cooper to provide support, information, guidance, training, coordination and oversight of our private providers, to ensure that an adequate services are delivered expeditiously and efficiently. They provide the technical assistance required to the providers and DCS regions regarding the TNKids Financials system to ensure that providers are being paid for the services they are providing to children. They are developing and revising the Provider Policy Manual. They are helping regions implement cross functional teams, develop a unified placement process in Tennessee and implement a performance based contracting system.

Organizational Development

Michele Munson, in partnership with the National Resource Center, and Sarah Greenblatt with Casey Family Services, will be giving us recommendations to help us develop a dynamic, productive organizational structure that will build staff capacity to flourish and succeed in accomplishing the critical reform efforts. Specific tasks would include a review of staffing patterns, meeting with staff for progress review, and defining and clarifying roles and responsibilities.

Team Excellence

Regional strategies for improvement in these areas are outlined in the 12 regional implementation plans that will be finalized by March 31, 2005. We will be building three new Team Excellence teams to support these areas of implementation. Each regional administrator is in the process of identifying one person who is the expert for his or her region to serve as the regional member of each Team Excellence.

Resource Home Recruitment, Retention and Support Team Excellence

Servella Terry – Central Office Lead

The focus of this team is on increasing the number of kinship, foster and adoptive homes, so that children can be placed in the most appropriate, least restrictive, most family-like environment possible within their own communities.

Child and Family Team Meeting Team Excellence

Susan Price – Central Office Lead

The focus of this team is to develop of a quality Child and Family Team Meeting process to engage families and children in critical decisions relating to the placement of children and permanency for children.

Adoptions Team Excellence

Lane Simpson – Central Office Lead

The purpose of this team is to ensure that the appropriate regional strategies, mechanisms and structures are in place in order to achieve timely permanency for each child presently in care and for children who enter departmental custody at a future date.

Shelby Region Continuous Quality Improvement

Submitted by Shirlene Bradford, Regional CQI Coordinator, Shelby County DCS

The CQI process has now been implemented in the Shelby County region. 30 of 33 teams have been trained on the CQI process and documentation. We rolled out the CQI process in our region with a kickoff session on January 7, 2005. Karen Davenport, state CQI analyst, assisted with introducing the process to the Shelby regional leadership team and team leaders. We have already begun to see and experience enthusiastic participation, collaborative dynamics and positive results since initiating the process.

During our CQI teams' first official month of brainstorming and problem solving, the teams have identified several case practice challenges, barriers to success and job-related concerns in such areas as visitation, workloads, parking and transportation, policy, CPS intake, case management practice, travel, on-call duty, staff recognition and inter-relational case practice.

When training our CQI teams on the process, we strive highly to promote teamwork. We feel that the CQI teams are like a tossed salad; individually, each ingredient may be tasty and fresh, but they will certainly not add up to a gourmet experience. Put together in the right way, the ingredients enhance one another to produce outstanding results. Each ingredient retains its character strengths, but continues to a more exciting and effective overall result.

Group Home Path to Excellence

Submitted by Albert Dawson, Director, Community Residential Facilities

During the past six months, DCS group homes have been working on a variety of initiatives. These initiatives are intended to improve the quality of life for youth in the programs and facilitate an atmosphere that is more conducive to treatment and more home-like. Increased emphasis is being placed on engaging youth in activities related to job readiness, independent living skills, reunification and recreation. This is being accomplished by the following:

Currently eight out of 10 programs have met the requirements for licensure approval. Our goal is to have the remaining two programs approved for licensure within 90 days.

In order to comply with Brian A. and best practice standards for congregate care, the population in each group home has been reduced to eight. Reducing the population improved the overall staff to youth ratio and has enabled programs to focus more on individual and group counseling, family involvement and community outreach. Upon admission, all youth are being staffed to determine appropriateness for enrollment in public school. As expected, this has resulted in more youth actually attending public school, thus increasing the possibility that the transition back to their community school will be more successful. Youth who have completed G.E.D. or attained a high school diploma are being encouraged, where appropriate, to attend college.

All age appropriate youth (16 and older) are being evaluated to determine job readiness. Youth are working at a variety of jobs in the community, including welding, landscaping, numerous restaurants, grocery stores, hotels and factories. Youth who cannot be employed are participating in community service work programs.

The home pass policy has been changed to afford youth the opportunity to be eligible for passes earlier in program and more frequently. This helps to strengthen family ties, foster reunification and assists with gradual transition back to the community.

To reduce idle time for the youth each group home is required to develop and post a 16 hour daily activity schedule. Each schedule includes a mandatory study period each school night. Youth who have completed their high school or G.E.D. programs and are not pursuing further education are engaged in other constructive activities. Activity programs are structured to afford youth more opportunities for participation. Activities are categorized as educational, recreational and incentive. All youth are required to participate in educational and recreational activities. Participation in incentive activities is based upon youth behavior.

Child and Family Team Meetings are being used to make major decisions regarding program development, placement, education and release. Home county case managers, families and other significant individuals are being invited to attend and encouraged to participate in these meetings.

Behavior management programs are being modified to place less emphasis on points and levels. Behavioral objectives as outlined in a youth's individual program plan are being used to evaluate progress. Behavior modification (disciplinary sanctions) is being reviewed for therapeutic value as opposed to punitive.

In general the programs are working toward creating a more homelike environment. Furnishings have been evaluated and are being replaced (to the extent that budget will allow) to reflect a home-like atmosphere. With this goal in mind, the programs are re-decorating the interiors and exteriors of the physical plants. Youth are being allowed to participate in this upgrading and are being encouraged to show their individuality in their room décor. Youth have really responded positively to this initiative.

In an effort to give all youth an opportunity to be exposed to music and literature from different cultures, a library has been established in each program. The libraries include a variety of books, CD's, cassettes, radios and players, available for the youth to check out.

Administrative staff has developed a monitoring instrument that is being utilized to evaluate each group home's progress toward implementation of these initiatives. Plans are to monitor each program for compliance by June 1, 2005. As part of this process, monitoring staff will do a facility walk through, review each active file, interview all youth and meet with staff from every shift. A report is generated from the monitoring visit and each director will develop a corrective action plan for areas of noted deficiency.

Core Leadership

Core Leadership meeting minutes from March 22 will be available in the next Weekly Wrap Up.



Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. – H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them. – James Baldwin

